

## INTERVIEW

# The Ludomusicology Research Group

In this interview with Mark Sweeney, GAME discusses the activities of an important research group for the study of music and games.

**GAME:** You started the Ludomusicology research project in 2011 to offer a musicological and academic approach to the study of games, as a group of three young academics. What was the motivation for this?

**Mark Sweeney (Ludomusicology Research Group):** I was just getting started with my doctoral research on aesthetic theory and video games music when my doctoral supervisor, Peter Franklin, put me in touch with Tim Summers. Tim was in the final stages of completing his doctoral work on video game genres and music at Bristol. We met in the King's Arms in Oxford to discuss our research and hit it off, and in our discussions about the landscape of video game music research, between us we only knew of one other doctoral student at that time, Michiel Kamp, who was at a similar stage to me at Cambridge. Michiel's thesis was (eventually) titled *Four Ways of Hearing Video Game Music*.

Although we were all working on different things, we all had a similar background having taken undergraduate and masters courses in musicology, and the three of us decided that it would be great to organize a conference to see what sorts of research other people were doing on this material – video game music. We also decided that as part of the conference organization, it would be helpful to have a website, so we founded the Ludomusicology Research Group in August 2011, and I built the initial site and started posting news items that we hoped would be of interest to the broader community.

The main motivation for the group was, from the outset, ultimately about discovering what other research was taking place around the world, and who was out there paying serious attention to video game music. It was a very important “discovery” phase, and we wanted to provide some form of a hub (the website, and the conference) to connect researchers together and share ideas. Of course, although we now have a more clearly defined community, the discovery phase is open-ended and is central to our group philosophy.

**GAME:** When did the first LUDO conference take place? How many people did it attract? What academic/professional background do they have? Over the years, has there been a shift in the type of people who attend?

**M.S.:** The RMA Study Day at St. Catherine's College in Oxford was the real starting point for the Research Group. Around the time we set up the website, we also linked up with Huw Catchpole-Davis who was doing a doctorate in composition at Oxford, with a focus on interactive and generative musical systems. In fact, it was Huw who designed the logo that we've used for all our branding ever since!

With support from our supervisors – Nicholas Cook (Cambridge University), Peter Franklin (University of Oxford), Guido Heldt (Bristol University), Robert Saxton (University of Oxford), and Duncan Williams (University of Oxford) – the four of us secured funding from the RMA and were very fortunate that both Anahid Kassabian and Isabella van Elferen agreed to provide keynote addresses at the inaugural Ludo conference. Tim had heard Anahid speak at Bristol, where she had expressed her interest in the video game as a musically significant medium. Michiel had studied with Isabella in Utrecht, and we were all familiar with her work on the topic.

Through Jonathan Williams (Oxford), we were also lucky to make contact with industry professionals like Rich Aitken at Nimrod Productions, who also gave up his time to participate and present. The incredible input of all these people ensured the event was a success and laid the foundation for future events.

We were fortunate that several other major practitioners and academics found our "Call For Papers" and attended the event, including Melanie Fritsch, Stephen Baysted, and Roger Moseley. Given that we hadn't done anywhere near as much promotion for the conference as we do now, it was quite surprising we had so many excellent contributors and delegates!

The number of delegates has increased, steadily, year-on-year. It's great to see many Ludo regulars returning every year, and there are always new faces too, and occasionally people representing previously underrepresented disciplines.

**GAME:** In the context of the Ludomusicology project, how does the group apply a musicological approach to game music, and distinguish between the study of game sound design and of game music?

**M. S.:** Although the very term "Ludomusicology" betrays our disciplinary background, as a group, we have from the outset conceived of the emerging field as being particularly interdisciplinary. At our conferences, we have always made efforts to include a wide range of papers from researchers and practitioners that represent a considerable diversity of disciplinary perspectives. Musicology is one discipline amongst many that is involved in this. We know that the term has been understood as divisive in some quarters, but we don't mean it to be exclusionary

at all. It's a fun, lighthearted term; it's become a useful shorthand to refer to the area of study, a way to network scholars, be honest about our backgrounds, and a way to say that we are taking to this material with a scholarly attitude.

**GAME:** How does Ludomusicology intersect with other centres and scenes regarding the study of sound and music in games?

**M. S.:** While we have been primarily in contact with other academic organizations and initiatives studying video game sound and music (see below), some of our colleagues are regular posters on the Overclocked Remix forums, which originate in the gaming community. There are more and more web-based communities and blogs focusing on music in games, in addition to real-world events like Video Games Live, and our connections with these are necessarily loose and informal.

The North American Conference on Video Game Music was established in 2014 by Steven Beverburg Reale, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner, after Steven got in touch with us following our 2013 conference in Liverpool. In 2016, their committee also included James Buhler, Karen Cook, and Elizabeth Medina-Gray. NACVGM is very close in spirit to our Ludo conferences, and there has been plenty of crossover in delegates and presenters. Our close relationship with our colleagues in North America is particularly important, and from the outset we worked together to provide greater access to conference opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Game Music Connect was established in 2013 by James Hannigan and John Broomhall (composers for multiple media forms, including games) and was targeted at primarily amateur, pro or semi-pro composers, but also to audio directors. We were very fortunate to have James Hannigan present at Ludo2014 in Chichester, alongside Richard Jacques and Winifred Phillips (both composers for successful games).

GameSoundCon was established in 2009 by Brian Schmidt and is targeted broadly at people working in the industry, or those involved in music and sound for more traditional media (film, T.V., music, etc.) who want to learn how games are different from linear media.

However, even older than all of these is Audio Mostly (<http://audiomostly.com>), which held their 10-year anniversary conference in October 2016 in Sweden (in 2017, the event was held in London). The first Audio Mostly conference (also in Sweden) in 2006 was described as a “conference on sound in games”, and in the following year, this was expanded to “Audio in all its forms”.

In December 2016, we teamed up with colleagues from NACVGM and Audio Mostly to launch the Society for the Study of Sound & Music in Games (SSSMG). SSSMG is an umbrella network with an extensive advisory board of leading academics and practitioners. The aim is to provide a hub to connect together these various groups of people working on game audio and to support

advances in the understanding of sound and music in games. The SSSMG helps anyone who investigates game sound and music, whether in an academic or professional setting, to discuss the topic together, exchange ideas and information, and keep up-to-date with new research. Anyone can join, and the members are always looking for new approaches to the subject.

SSSMG have since announced our plans to launch a new journal entitled the *Journal of Sound & Music in Games (JSMG)*. JSMG will be an academic peer-reviewed journal presenting high-quality research on video game music and sound. The journal will not seal game audio into a scholarly suburb, but will instead be an outward-looking publication that seeks to engage game audio practitioners and researchers from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, computer science, media studies, psychology and sociology, as well as musicology. Keep an eye on the website in the coming months for updates on this exciting project.

**GAME:** What are your selection criteria for venues of the Ludomusicology conferences? How did Southampton contribute to the presentation and experience of the 2016 event?

**M. S.:** Our original aim was to encourage inter-university collaboration and dialogue, and to establish game music as a research strength for UK academic musicology. I think this was because, at the start, we did not foresee the international scale of the emerging field or our full potential role as a hub to facilitate and encourage research on video game music across the globe and cross-disciplinary borders.

We're particularly grateful to Anahid Kassabian who was the first person to suggest another conference after the Oxford study day and kindly offered Liverpool as a host. By doing the second conference the next year, it implied it was going to become an annual event. Even by this second year, authors were contacting us to say, "I can't make it this year, but I'll make the next one", under the assumption it was going to be an ongoing project. This set the precedent we've been lucky to be able to follow.

Subsequently, our selection criteria for the Ludomusicology conference venues have evolved on a pragmatic basis. In 2015 we held our first overseas conference at Utrecht University, and we hope to alternate between the UK and the [European] continent in future, if possible. We also try to take into account the accessibility of the host institution for international travelers and do our best to keep costs as low as possible for what is still predominantly an early career academic demographic.

We have been fortunate to have a great diversity of approaches at the Ludo conferences. In particular, we've had solid papers from computer scientists, ethnomusicologists, psychologists, theatre studies, and so on. In terms of disciplines, we see ourselves as a broad conference. All disciplinary approaches are welcome

to come and play together in this domain. We have tended to focus on game music through the lens of musicology, because we have that disciplinary background and that this was an area that musicology hadn't really approached very much before. There is sonic substance in games that is understood by creators, players, and critics as specifically musical, and the disciplinary approaches that musicology has built up has interesting things to tell us about this material. One of the most exciting things about this topic is that it is so well suited to interdisciplinary collaboration. Just as we bring (primarily) our musicological training to bear, so we want to learn from those with disciplinary resources we don't have, and to try and discuss these together. Every year, we've had involvement from industry professionals [mainly game composers], and we see it as a significant priority to cultivate those links alongside developing cross-disciplinary connections.

**GAME:** How do you reflect back on the experience of the Ludomusicology Research Group concerning the growing attention for music-related aspects of gaming?

**M. S.:** It's been inspiring to be working in this field at a time of such growth and interest. If we hadn't started something like this, it would have evolved elsewhere anyway. The connections make it useful to be aware of other research in progress, and an opportunity to talk with other scholars working on similar ideas. I think it also helps to cultivate a collaborative, rather than purely competitive approach. One of our long-term delegates said to me during our 2016 conference: "It's great that we can be critical of each other so much more now." I'm delighted that this person felt this way – that we can now hold each other to a higher academic standard and that it provides a comfortable, supportive environment for discussion and productive criticism.

**GAME:** Has anything changed regarding game music in the industry and/or in the academic world? Has the academic world been chasing up developments only, or is it also fostering new ways of looking at games? And, how do you think the area of game music and sound studies is developing now?

**M. S.:** It has been fascinating to see game audio studies slowly becoming part of an accepted landscape of study. It took film music scholarship quite some time to establish its own legitimacy, so I think we're making good progress. We've also been lucky to witness exciting times in the industrial development of game audio and sound.

We are on a continued mission for further interdisciplinarity, and that's going to be especially important in discussing new developments of VR [Virtual Reality]. This is an interesting phase of audio development when some of the fundamental questions about game audio that we've been talking about are now being discussed by industry practitioners, some of which are also consult-

ing with academics [on] how to approach these issues. We have been working in partnership with ThinkSpace Education (<https://thinkspaceeducation.com/?v=79cba1185463>), a provider of professional degrees in game audio. This is one way that the research at our conferences helps to inform the practice of those who are entering the industry as audio professionals.

Again, coming from musicology, we've tended to emphasize historical and critical approaches related to user experience, musical cultures, and compositional creation. In that sense, yes, it is retrospective, but it's also an attempt to understand the experience of players who are at the heart of this cultural locus. And that's a concurrent phenomenon. We would, though, be very interested in engaging in closer dialogue with the industry. There's certainly the potential for this kind of study to develop into industry-facing research, as a domain that has the time and resources to engage with questions about music and audio in games that commercial companies do not have the expertise, time and resources to answer.

**GAME:** Please tell us more about the edited collection *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music* (2016). How was this shaped within the context of the research group and its conferences? When did you start work on this?

**M. S.:** We are delighted that our edited volume, *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, was published by Equinox. The majority of the chapters were born out of papers given at our inaugural conference in 2012, although we did not begin work on the project until much later. Authors have taken time to expand those ideas and develop them. Rather than focusing on history or particular types of game, we've been trying to put together a collection that will be useful to provide different ways of understanding this game music, which is one of the main projects of our scholarship.

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#### AUTHOR'S INFO:

C Mark Sweeney (independent researcher) is a founding member of the Ludomusicology Research Group, and the Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games. He has co-edited an anthology of essays and a journal special issue, and co-edits the book series "Studies in Game Sound and

Music". Mark's research interests stem from a DPhil thesis on aesthetic theory and video game music, completed at the University of Oxford where he was also a Stipendiary Lecturer in Music at St Catherine's College.